UN WOMEN'S COMMISSION SEEKS TO RE-ENERGIZE NAIROBI STRATEGIES

By 1995, women should occupy at least 30 per cent of decision-making posts at the national level. They should also make up at least 30 per cent of delegations to international negotiations on peace and disarmament. These targets were recommended to Governments by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which met at Vienna from 26 February to 9 March 1990.

The Commission called for the convening of a world conference on women in 1995 to assess how countries are implementing the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women for the period up to the year 2000, adopted in 1985 at the end of the United Nations Decade for Women. The 1995 conference would be smaller and shorter than the previous ones, held at Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). Preparatory work for the conference would take place within the Commission's normal work.

"Peace dividends"—the savings from disarmament resulting from the fading of the cold war—should be redirected to social and economic development, the Commission stated. It called for studies on media stereotyping of women and on the way violence against women in the media is related to violence against women in reality.

The Commission proposed ways to further women's advancement. According to reports presented to the Commission, despite the optimism which characterized the adoption of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, the condition of women world-wide has not changed much over the past five years, and *de facto* discrimination continues.

Other major issues discussed by the Commission were the launching of a world-wide "legal literacy" campaign to inform women of their rights; revision of textbooks to eliminate biased presentations; maintenance of government statistics on the relative remuneration of women and men based on the principle of equal pay for equal work; efforts to achieve a 50 per cent improvement in the ratio of women's pay to men's by the year 1995; and steps to bring about a 50 per cent increase in the number of women in leadership positions in government, political parties and trade unions.

The 45-member Commission, which meets annually and reports to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, was set up by the General Assembly in 1946 and is one of the United Nations oldest commissions. Its job is to establish legal standards for the treatment of women and to prepare recommendations and reports on issues affecting women, including their role in development. It also collects and analyses data to monitor the status of women around the world.

FIVE YEARS AFTER NAIROBI . . .

The Commission reviewed reports by United Nations experts concerning government implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. According to the reports, despite efforts by most countries to enact legal measures to ensure women's equal opportunities before the law, *de facto* discrimination continues and women continue to be unaware of their legal rights and unfamiliar with the legal and administrative systems which implement them.

Stereotyped images of male and female roles in textbooks or in the media provide a justification for an unequal *status quo* in many countries.

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Even though women are an important part of the work-force, their economic participation is still usually unequal, characterized by job segregation, unequal pay for work of equal value, inadequate career prospects and lack of full participation in economic decision-making.

Women are "grossly under-represented" in political decision-making circles. The number of women in parliaments, parties and formal government remains low. In 1987, for instance, on average only 3.5 per cent of the ministerial positions in national Governments were held by women. In 1989, out of 159 United Nations Member States, only five had women heads of Government (3.1 per cent).

For the most part, decisions on public policies that affect women are not in women's hands. Furthermore, in only a very few countries do women decide the outcome of elections by voting for candidates or parties that promise to promote their interests. In the view of the United Nations experts, this situation will continue until more women are presented as candidates for office or allowed to build careers in senior management in the public sector.

Despite the considerable expansion of girls' access to education in the 1970s, widespread illiteracy among adult women persists. Similarly, the condition of women's health and health services for them are improving only slowly in most countries, and violence against women in the family and in society cuts across all lines of income, class and culture.

Continuing urbanization, migration and economic change have increased the proportion of women heading families, as well as the numbers of other women who have had to enter the labour-force. These women have experienced increasing difficulties in reconciling their economic role with the demands on them to provide child and dependent care.

Despite the fact that the 1980s were on the whole a boom time, third-world countries shared very little in the boom, according to UN figures. In some African and Latin American countries, development virtually stopped. In these countries, Governments found themselves without the resources to launch programmes on behalf of women.

At the international level, while there were signs of improvement in planning and co-ordination for women's advancement, action was often stymied because of lack of resources.

As they reviewed these problems, Commission members also studied 17 recommendations proposed by the UN experts to address the problem of re-energizing the Strategies. The experts stressed the importance of prompt and decisive action to remove obstacles to the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. Failure to implement them, said the experts, might leave women in the next millennium as badly off or worse off than they are today. This would result, in their view, in a massive misuse of human resources and slowed overall economic and social development.

In her opening address to the session, Margaret J. Anstee, Director-General of the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs in Vienna, echoed the appeal. "The world cannot afford to write off the generation of women living today, the basis of whose lives is inequality," she told the Commission. "Practical steps must be taken now to empower the women of today to control their lives and to make their contribution to society and the economy."

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UN ACTS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

TEN-YEAR-OLD WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION SERVES AS CATALYST FOR ACTION

The United Nations Committee concerned with promoting women's rights met in January to evaluate how well States were observing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, a treaty which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1979. On the Committee's agenda were problems as critical as efforts to end child labour, enforced prostitution, child marriage, female circumcision and illiteracy.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women is an oversight mechanism set up by the Convention, which is essentially an international bill of rights for women. It is composed of 23 jurists, lawyers, teachers, diplomats and other experts on women's affairs, elected by the States that have ratified the Convention, to serve "in their personal capacity", i.e. not as government representatives. At its annual meetings, the Committee reviews reports submitted by Governments within one year of the date of ratification and every four years thereafter. Since 1979, 62 of the 101 States parties have filed at least one report.

At its two-week session at United Nations Headquarters in New York (from 22 January to 2 February), the Committee this year reviewed periodic reports from 12 States parties to the Convention: Canada, Egypt, the Federal Republic of Germany, Malawi, Mexico, Mongolia, Peru, Thailand, Turkey, the Ukrainian SSR, the United Kingdom and the United Republic of Tanzania. In what was, in some cases, a sharp exchange, Committee members questioned officials from the reporting States and made recommendations for action based on their examination of the information the States provided.

Spurred by the Committee's probing, a number of States protested that slow economic development or lack of resources had not yet permitted them to put into effect certain articles of the treaty. The Committee pointed out that even if a country had economic problems, with proper political resolve it would take steps to ensure equal rights. Some States restated reservations about complying with certain articles of the treaty, citing national security needs. The Committee rejected the relevance of this argument and continued to press for change. As the session ended, the Committee included in its final report, which will be submitted to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, a call for information campaigns to promote eradication of the practice of female circumcision. It also called for steps to counter acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) among women and children.

Despite the sometimes strained atmosphere of the session, Committee members interviewed afterwards were generally optimistic about the value and effectiveness of the Convention. In the opinion of most of them, representatives of reporting Governments could be expected to return home and work for greater compliance as a result of the dialogue with the Committee.

"The discussion between the Committee and reporting Governments is a constructive exercise in which everybody learns", said Zagorka Ilic, a Committee member from Yugoslavia. "The Committee learns what Governments think. The Governments learn how they look to outsiders. The discussion helps to push Governments to speed up ratification and change laws, change textbooks, change stereotypes.

"Governments sign the Convention because they want to show that they are developing and that their situation is favourable to women. They want to participate in the modern world. But they do not implement all the Convention's articles, for domestic reasons. The reservations are there to help Govern-

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ments overcome their difficulties. They provide a 'cover' for the Governments for a period to adjust their local situation", Ms. Ilic said.

Committee Chairman Elizabeth Evatt (Australia) lauded the work of the Committee as the Convention's instrument. "It enables us to lift up the rug and see what's underneath and what needs to be changed. In every case, parties to the Convention do review national laws to see whether they are in compliance with the Convention.

"As the years go by, the Committee speaks with ever more authority as its recommendations become stronger", continued Ms. Evatt, who is a distinguished jurist in her own country. "In its dealings with individual States, the Committee has given increasingly clear outlines on issues. Governments have shown increasing interest in the Convention and the Committee, as witnessed by the fact that, in 1990, Governments proposed an unprecedented 23 candidates for 12 seats on the Committee which were about to fall vacant."

Explaining the perspective of developing countries on the Convention, Merwat Talawy (Egypt) said, "Newly independent countries look to international law as the source of their legislation and as a protecting shield for their own people. Legislators and government officials cite the United Nations as the international norm. When legislation is being drafted or reconsidered within a country, women's advocates can say to a government minister, 'Why did you sign the Convention if you won't make our laws conform with it?' The cabinet minister knows that it is the image of the State itself which is exposed before an international Committee."

Ms. Talawy, who is also the Egyptian Ambassador to Austria and her country's representative on the UN Commission on the Status of Women, said that "United Nations law helps change mind-sets. It gives a push to women, and to government ministries. If a Minister for Social Affairs says he has no budget for women's programmes, the women's advocate points out that the Government is obliged to report to the United Nations, and the Minister reconsiders."

Queried about the general effectiveness of the Convention, Committee member Hanna Beate Schöpp-Schilling, Director-General of the Department for Women's Questions in the Federal Republic of Germany's Ministry for Youth, Family Affairs, Women and Health, called the Convention a valuable catalyst for change. "Without the Convention it might have taken developing countries 20 years to bring themselves up to the level of its norms. But with it, educated women, lawyers and representatives of women's organizations can band together to demand changes that will bring their country up to its level."

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